

# BiophilicCities



## Cities are for Wildlife: An Interview with Camilla Fox, Founder and Executive Director of Project Coyote

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Camilla H. Fox is the founder and executive director of Project Coyote- a national coalition of scientists, educator, predator friendly ranchers and citizen leaders promoting compassionate conservation and coexistence between people and wildlife through education, science, and advocacy. With 20 years of experience working on behalf of wildlife and wildlands and a Masters degree in wildlife ecology, policy, and conservation, Camilla's work has been featured in several films and the New York Times, the BBC, NPR, Orion, and USA Today magazine. A frequent speaker and blogger on these issues, Camilla has authored more than 70 publications and is co-author of *Coyotes in Our Midst: Coexisting with an Adaptable and Resilient Carnivore*, co-editor and lead author of the book, *Cull of the Wild: A Contemporary Analysis of Trapping in the United States* and producer of the award-winning documentary *Cull of the Wild ~ The Truth Behind Trapping*. Camilla has served as an appointed member on the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture's National Wildlife Services Advisory Committee and currently serves on several non-profit advisory boards including *Living with Wolves*, the *Human Wildlife Conflict Collaboration*, *Felidae Conservation Fund* and the *Northeast Wolf Coalition*. In 2006, Camilla received the *Humanitarian of the Year Award* from the *Marin Humane Society* and the *Christine Stevens Wildlife Award* from the *Animal Welfare Institute*. She has been named one of the *100 Guardian Angels of the Planet* and was awarded the *John Muir Conservation Award* by the *John Muir Association* in 2014.

For more information visit: <http://www.projectcoyote.org/contact.html#camilla>

### How did you get involved in working with coyotes? What inspired you to create Project Coyote?

My father studied wild and domestic canids so I grew up with a lot of canids in my mix including an orphaned wolf who lived with my family for 15 years. I also spent a lot of time exploring nature and came to have a deep love for the wild. After co-founding the *Boston University Students for the Ethical Treatment of Animals* while in college, I knew I wanted to dedicate my life to protecting animals and nature. I have worked in the field of animal protection and wildlife conservation for the past 20+ years. I saw a need for an organization that would provide a voice for coyotes and other maligned and misunderstood predators while promoting coexistence through education, science and advocacy. I also saw state wildlife agencies that were cash and staff strapped unable to provide the necessary information and resources to the public about how to live with wildlife- and in particular coyotes and other predators - and reduce conflicts in an increasingly human-populated world. I opted to start an organization in 2008 that would fill that void and bridge between animal protection and conservation while providing the tools, information and resources for agencies and the public to help promote coexistence. I founded Project Coyote with the premise that individual animals matter, as do populations.- - and that coexistence is possible and necessary. We can't extricate individual animals from conservation efforts, especially when looking at urban wildlife.

We chose the coyote as our ambassador species because they are the most misunderstood, maligned and

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**PROMOTING COEXISTENCE**  
**BETWEEN PEOPLE & WILDLIFE THROUGH**  
**EDUCATION, SCIENCE & ADVOCACY**

persecuted native carnivore in North America. We estimate that at least half a million are killed every year by the federal government, trappers, hunters and individual ranchers. That equates to about one coyote killed per minute. Our belief is that if we can shift the way we view and treat coyotes, we can shift the way we view and treat all predators.

Coyotes, unlike foxes or wolves, only inhabit North America. They are our unique Native American song dog and are revered, respected and appreciated by many Native America tribes. The fact that they do exist and persist in all environments, including our urban environments was another reason that I thought they were the perfect ambassador for an organization that is trying to promote coexistence between humans and wildlife in all landscapes.

### **How are we doing in terms of co-existing with coyotes?**

It varies by state and region. Unfortunately there is still wide scale anti-predator sentiment in this country that stems from our colonization of this continent and subsequent mass killing of large predators and anything else we feared and called “other” including Native Americans. So promoting acceptance and fostering appreciation for animals we have for so long persecuted and misunderstood is not always easy. Our approach is to foster coexistence through education, science and advocacy.

Project Coyote creates models of coexistence in both urban and rural areas to show what coexistence looks like and what human and animal behavior we are trying to shape and model. For example, our Coyote Friendly Communities program is focused on promoting collaboration and partnership to promote proactive coexistence between people and coyotes, emphasizing consistent and proactive messaging, outreach, and education. Generally, when we are brought into a given community, we try to get all of the players to the table including animal/wildlife control, state, county, open space and parks, and wildlife agencies. We include all of the different agencies that are involved with coyotes and other urban wildlife to ensure that there is consistency in educational outreach, messaging, and response. For

example, if there is a situation where a coyote has lost its weariness of people, our plan suggests a certain protocol for response. That way any agency that is the first responder employs the same response.

### **What are some of the biggest challenges of cohabitation with coyotes?**

One of the greatest challenges is risk perception. People are fearful of predators and the more urban we become the more separate we view ourselves from the wild and particularly from wild nature and predators. Another challenge is a general lack of public awareness and understanding of why wildlife and wildlands matter. This goes back to why education is so key. When we have that disconnect with a child or adult, I think it is incredibly dangerous for society. We risk ending up with a society of people who live in urban landscapes completely disconnected from the wild- from the very earth that sustains us. What does that mean in terms of planetary stewardship and the recognition that we share this planet and have a responsibility to take care of it for future generations? We can't love and care for what we don't understand and know.

### **What are some of the key elements of your Coyote Friendly Community program?**

As coyotes expand their range into vacant niches which wolves once filled, and urban sprawl encroaches into wildlife habitat, human-coyote encounters are increasing. Communities are ill equipped to deal with the presence of coyotes; conflicts result when uninformed people intentionally or unintentionally feed wild animals or otherwise encourage a lack of fear of humans. Moreover, state wildlife agencies and local governments are often cash and staff strapped, so that urban wildlife issues and public outreach are not priorities. Too often the solution to coyote conflicts – whether in agricultural or urban areas – is lethal and indiscriminate. Traditional control practices include trapping, snaring, poisoning, and denning (killing pups in their den).

Project Coyote's Coyote Friendly Communities Program promotes safe communities by educating and equipping urban and rural audiences with the tools, resources, and expertise needed to foster coexistence

between people, domestic animals and wildlife. The keys are education, communication, science, behavior modification and the development of a tiered response to bold coyote behavior. We promote compassionate coexistence through education, science and advocacy in collaboration with municipalities, wildlife agencies, research institutions, and schools. Project Coyote has developed a model Coexisting with Coyotes Plan & Educational Outreach Program emphasizing public education, consistent messaging, and community empowerment.

It is striking that balance between the person who sees the coyotes as something he or she doesn't want in their neighborhood and the other person who welcomes urban wildlife. We are trying to strike that balance by putting tips and tools out there that quell fears and move a community into proactive prevention mode instead of reactive killing mode.

On an individual and community level, we recommend reducing and eliminating attractants. We have a plethora of tips and tools on our Resources page on our website, which we make easily accessible so that communities and agencies can download and print as needed. Cleaning up bird feeders and ensuring compost piles and trash cans are properly sealed are all very specific tips and then working at the community level with the agencies to also reduce attractants, so that conflicts are prevented.

A second one would be addressing intentional and unintentional wildlife feeding. We see situations where well-intentioned people feed wildlife that can result in a bad outcome once the animal becomes habituated and loses their natural wariness of people. We call this loving an animal to death. All too frequently the habituated animal ends up dead because a neighbor doesn't want it around and the animal now has no fear of people and starts seeking easy handouts from the neighborhood. A trapper is then often brought in to remove and kill the animal. This happens all too frequently and yet can be avoided easily- but it takes a community wide effort.

We work with cities and counties to pass wildlife feeding ordinances which are often used as educational tools, but include



an enforcement component and penalty provision for repeat offenders.

Bringing agencies together behind a plan includes educational outreach, protocols around messaging, and response to conflicts. There is a component of hazing – also known as aversive conditioning – of problem animals, which is part of the toolkit to address habituated coyotes– , instead of killing. The concept of hazing is to use aversive stimuli to “rewild” an animal so they’re not so comfortable around people.

Part of my goal and vision in founding Project Coyote was to fill this educational void that our wildlife agencies haven’t put enough resources into. Sending out a brochure or printing something in a community newsletter is not enough. Educational outreach needs to be persistent and it needs to be in a variety of forms and mediums. One example is using an insert in the utility bill that goes to every resident and is a mailing that is already being sent, so it is easy and inexpensive. We provide all of the information for the insert so it costs a city very little. There has to be a multitude of platforms to get the messaging out there and ensure that it is consistent across the board with all of the agencies that are first responders.

### **How can cities ignite a passion for citizens to co-exist with wildlife?**

First and foremost, they need to appeal to people’s self- interest. As much as I would like to think that we would not need to appeal to self-interest, and that people who see a coyote or fox in their neighborhood appreciate that animal and know what to do to reduce any conflicts, this isn’t always the case. I think that cities that work to foster collaboration, can get behind a long term plan or program that emphasizes outreach and education, working with experts who can share their message, and partnering with students and educators in the community. It has to be multi-faceted when we are talking about urban wildlife and the ways in which we reach people- both young and old.

### **Is there potential to tap into that connection with another form of life that might help us make the argument for humane coexistence?**

Absolutely, which is why compassionate conservation is part of our mission. Empathy is key. In addition, getting people to understand that the coyote in their neighborhood is actually not very different from their domestic cousins is important in shifting how society views and treats coyotes and other wildlife. Dogs and coyotes are so similar genetically, they can interbreed- though that’s not very common. It is the same for wolves. There is a huge disconnect considering we spend millions dotting on our domestic animals while our federal government spends millions of taxpayer dollars to kill their wild cousins.

Coyotes are often vilified for domestic pet attacks. We have a lot of work to do around what it means be a responsible caretaker for domestic animals whether that’s cats, dogs, or livestock. It is our responsibility when we put any of those animals out into the ecosystem that we protect them.

The media can be great ally and avenue toward raising public awareness and dispelling myths with regard to coyotes and other predators (they can also exacerbate conflicts through unnecessary fear-mongering). We try to work with the media to help promote coexistence and to provide science-based information to the public about wildlife.

### **Do you encounter people or communities that view the wildness of having coyotes in their community as a benefit?**

Part of our goal is reaching educators and youth to help instill appreciation and respect for coyotes and other predators who have historically been so vilified and demonized. I think that the concept of Nature Deficit Disorder is a real problem as we become more urbanized across the globe. This disconnect from the wild is very dangerous. We must raise children who are aware of the other creatures with whom we share this planet. Planetary stewardship and caring for others generally comes from experience and familiarity. We don’t care for or empathize with what is alien or foreign to us. The coyote in many ways is a wonderful ambassador for educators to connect their students to wild nature. Here we have this predator in our midst, even in our most urban city

centers that can teach us so much about the importance of apex predators in maintaining ecosystem health and integrity. Among other ecological services, coyotes provide free rodent control in both rural and urban areas. Predator friendly ranchers get this concept and recognize that keeping coyotes and other predators around is a benefit. The coyote is the ultimate ambassador for bridging between the wild and the civilized. What an opportunity for an educator to take their students out tracking in urban green spaces to look for coyote tracks and scat and learn about trophic cascades and the role that these keystone predators play in urban landscapes. It gives me hope that there are an increasing number of teachers who want to connect their students to the wild and are looking for opportunities and organizations, like ours, to partner with.

Project Coyote’s Keeping It Wild education program aims to do just that: connect kids with the wild and to foster an appreciation and love for wildlife and wildlands. Our program empowers educators with the tools and information they need to do this. We hope to raise more funds to be able to expand this effort nationwide. Reaching youth is absolutely key to planetary health: we must ensure that this next generation connects with and cares for the wild and we believe Coyote can be the ambassador for that connection.

Some residents may want to see coyotes more often. Is this a tension when it is promoted to keep them at a distance through hazing and other strategies?

Some people welcome wildlife in their neighborhoods while others want wildlife – particularly predators – kept at bay. This can create tensions within a community and pose challenges to city managers and wildlife agencies. Project Coyote’s approach is to recognize that there are differences in people’s perception and experience of wildlife. For example I may find it exhilarating to see or hear a coyote on my daily walks whereas my neighbor might be terrified with the same experience. We try to empower individuals and communities with the tools and information and resources they need to feel comfortable with wildlife in their midst – but also to appreciate them at a



distance by keeping coyotes and other wild animals wild and wary. We advocate hazing or aversive conditioning in situations where people feel uncomfortable with a coyote in their presence. Hazing essentially involves being big, bad and loud to encourage the animal to leave the area. Most of the time this is not necessary as coyotes and other predators generally want to have nothing to do with us. Conflicts with coyotes often occur when there is a domestic dog involved. People need to be responsible pet guardians and be sensitive to the wildlife inhabiting the areas where they recreate. For example during pupping season – April to July- we advise people to avoid areas where coyotes may be denning and protecting their pups by walking their dogs on leashes to avoid conflicts. We have many tools and tips for coexistence on our resources page on our website at [ProjectCoyote.org](http://ProjectCoyote.org); we also have a coyote hazing field guide that can be downloaded for free on our website along with many other brochures and information.

### **What do make of our increasing knowledge of how coyotes live in and around cities?**

We actually don't know a lot about urban coyote ecology. This is a relatively nascent field and we still have much to learn. With long-term studies in Chicago and elsewhere we are starting to learn some fascinating things about how coyotes cohabitate alongside humans in urban areas. For example, despite access to anthropogenic food sources, several diet studies show that coyotes generally seek natural prey including rodents, rabbits, fruit, and insects even in the most densely populated cities where there is a plethora of human food sources. We also have learned that coyotes take advantage of our modifications of the environment and regularly use human created corridors such as frontage roads, powerlines, and train tracks to traverse the landscape. Road mortality is significant for coyotes in urban areas and this kind of knowledge can help inform us of how we can better plan our highways and roads to reduce roadkill.

### **Are there particular cities that you know of or work with that seem to be leading the way in terms of humane coexistence with coyotes and other predators?**

I certainly think that San Francisco – the city of Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals- is on its way. We have been working with several agencies and institutions in San Francisco to promote coexistence and an appreciation for coyotes and other wild animals that inhabit the city. The city is an excellent example and has emulated a lot of what we have done in Marin County, north of San Francisco. Since 2000, our county has adopted a non-lethal approach to living with predators, particularly coyotes. I think that the entire bay area generally has a pro-wildlife ethos.

Other cities including Washington, DC, Calabasas, California, and Vancouver BC to name but a few are doing a good job in promoting coexistence with coyotes and other wildlife with the help of advocates and organizations. We have also worked with smaller towns like Superior, Colorado that have adopted our Coyote Coexistence Plan and program and have been quite successful in promoting coexistence and reducing or eliminating conflicts.

### **Are you optimistic that it is possible to co-exist with coyotes and other predators?**

Yes, I am very hopeful on that front. It is a community effort. I see communities across the country emphasizing coexistence and implementing educational outreach programs about how to live with wildlife. An example here in California is Calabasas, that was spending \$30,000 a year to trap and kill coyotes because some residents perceived them as a threat. Project Coyote was asked by residents opposed to the trapping if we could help. We met with city council members, the city manager and the head of environmental services, and essentially turned them around from seeing coyotes as a problem and something that they needed to control to seeing them as a species that should be appreciated for their ecological services (like free rodent control). Their city council passed a resolution barring expenditures on coyote trapping and worked with Project Coyote in developing a coexistence plan and educational outreach program for them. Now they consider themselves a wildlife friendly community. They are putting resources into wildlife corridors and passed a resolution

condemning the use and sale of rodenticides recognizing what a threat such poison poses to non-target animals and the environment. The hard part is dealing with a perception that our cities are not places for wildlife, especially for predators. That anti-predator sentiment still persists in North America. That is probably our greatest challenge as we try to shift the paradigm from killing to coexistence in both urban and rural areas. The attitude that predators are vermin needing to be controlled and have no value persists.

### **Where do you see Project Coyote going? What is the next ten years going to look like?**

Project Coyote uses science, education and advocacy to promote coexistence between people and wildlife. We work to create humane solutions to mitigate human wildlife conflicts while promoting education and long-term successful models. We need to show how we live with wildlife and scale those models up. This has to be multi-faceted and innovative to reach a wide audience with consistent and persistent messaging. Multimedia is crucial and is going to increasingly be more important in public outreach efforts. Using technology to our advantage in educating youth about the wild is part of our strategy and vision.

How we can better coexist? – tapping into technology, fostering partnerships, working with urban planners, local and state wildlife agencies, educators and youth and emphasizing education are key to long term success. Coexistence is ultimately a community endeavor and we need to get all stakeholders to the table to manifest successful outcomes and models for people and wildlife.

Ultimately, we need a new approach in the way coyotes – indeed all native carnivores – are viewed and “managed” in the United States. Project Coyote provides a variety of resources for communities who wish to develop coexistence programs. These developing models with community partners demonstrate how we live with predators and why the health, integrity and resilience of our environments depends on coexistence.

